

# Deconstruction of the Phallogocentric View in Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot*

Julian Barnes'in *Flaubert'in Papağanı* Adlı Romanında  
Fallogosantrik Görüşün Yapı-Söküme Uğratılması

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## Abstract

Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984) deals mainly with the problematic nature of truth, but it also questions the dichotomy between the self and the other. Barnes depicts the struggle of the male narrator to integrate his self through his deceased wife Ellen, who appears as the "other". The narrator feels incomplete due to the absence of his wife through whom he defines his self. Hence, he tries to regain his integrity by associating himself with Flaubert, an eminent male writer. Even so, however, he needs his wife, the "other," to confirm his manliness. Accordingly, the narrator tries to testify his presence by negating Ellen's body, femininity, and sexual power in his fiction, but he cannot restore his self thoroughly as his wife's memories continue to overwhelm his mind and narrative. The present study examines the ambiguous relationship between Geoffrey Braithwaite and his wife Ellen through referring to deconstructive and feminist views about phallogocentrism. In so doing, the article seeks to show that the male narrator's interest about Flaubert and his parrot conceals his obsession to find out the female "other" whose absence damages the cohesion of his male self.

**Keywords:** Barnes, *Flaubert's Parrot*, phallogocentrism, deconstruction, feminism

## Öz

Julian Barnes'in *Flaubert'in Papağanı* (1984) adlı romanı, esasen hakikatin problemlili doğası ile ilgilense de ben ve öteki kavramları arasındaki ikilemi de sorgular. Barnes, erkek anlatıcının benliğini "öteki" olarak görünen ölmüş karısı Ellen aracılığıyla bütünleştirme mücadelesini gösterir. Anlatıcı, benliğini tanımlamasını sağlayan eşinin yokluğundan dolayı kendisini eksik hisseder. Bu nedenle, kendisini önemli bir erkek yazar olan Flaubert ile ilişkilendirerek benlik bütünlüğünü tekrar kazanmaya çalışır. Ancak yine de eril benliğini teyit etmesi için "öteki" olan karısına ihtiyaç duyar. Bu yüzden, anlatıcı, varlığını Ellen'in vücudunu, kadınlığını ve cinsel gücünü kurmaca yazınında yadsıyarak kanıtlamaya çalışır; fakat karısının anıları zihnini ve anlatılarını kontrol etmeye devam ettiğinden benliğini bütünüyle eski haline kavuşturamaz. Bu çalışma, Geoffrey Braithwaite ve karısı Ellen arasındaki muğlak ilişkiyi, fallogosantrizm hakkındaki yapı-sökümcü ve feminist düşüncelere değinerek incelemektedir. Böylelikle, makale, erkek anlatıcının Flaubert'e ve papağanına olan ilgisinin, yokluğu eril benliğinin bütünlüğüne zarar veren "öteki" kadın figürünü bulma konusundaki saplantısını gizlediğini göstermeyi amaçlamaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Julian Barnes, *Flaubert'in Papağanı*, fallogosantrizm, yapı-sökümcülük, feminizm

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Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984) is a quasi-biography of Gustave Flaubert, and it reveals the ambiguous relationship between the male self and the female "other". The male narrator, whose perspective dominates the whole narrative, struggles to define his self through his dead wife, who appears as the "other". His desire to assert power as the dominant sex over his wife, the "inferior" sex, is amalgamated with his feeling of insecurity about his position due to his wife's infidelity. Although the narrator tries to exclude his wife from his mind and narrative to testify his presence, he cannot detach himself from his deceased wife whose memories continue to haunt his mind. The present study examines the ambiguous relationship between the male self and the female "other" from a deconstructive feminist perspective to show that the male narrator's fascination with Flaubert and his parrot conceals his unconscious need to compensate for the absence of the female "other" that threatens the integrity of his male self.

Phallogocentrism is a term coined by Jacques Derrida to criticise binary thinking imposed by patriarchal culture. The term is derived from logocentrism, which aims to "establish a self-sufficient foundation or transcendental signified" and phallogocentrism which advocates phallic primacy (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 11). Derrida argues that phallogocentrism forces people to think in binaries as it supports the idea that "the sign always implies within itself the distinction between signifier and signified" (*Of Grammatology* 11). He also maintains that phallogocentric discourse privileges one term in each opposition, thus the stratified relationship between binaries is not natural but "organized and hierarchized" (*Of Grammatology* 13). Undermining the dominance of one category within the dichotomy, Derrida questions the validity of binary thinking: "At the point where the concept of *différance* intervenes [...] all the conceptual oppositions of metaphysics [...] (signifier/signified; sensible/intelligible; writing/speech; speech [parole]/language [langue]; diachrony/synchrony; space/time; passivity/activity etc.) become non-pertinent" (*Positions* 29). Since he believes in the arbitrariness of dichotomies, he questions the binary relationship between man and woman. According to Derrida, male supremacy is a legend created by patriarchal society in which men dominate women and "positive values are ascribed to male identity, while negative values are often associated with female identity" (Richards 101). Therefore, he concludes that "[t]he natural woman (nature, mother, or if one wishes, sister), is a represented or a signified replaced and supplanted, in desire, that is to say in social passion, beyond need" (*Of Grammatology* 266).

Derrida challenges the phallogocentric view that ascribes a passive role to the female subject by claiming that binaries depend on one another to be defined: "We could [...] take up all the coupled oppositions [...] not in order to see opposition vanish but to see the emergence of a necessity such that one of the terms appears as the difference of the other, the other as 'differed' within the systematic ordering of the same" ("Différance" 290). Thus, he maintains that the phallogocentric community needs a female "other" to define itself: "The displacing of the relationship with the mother, with nature, with being as the

fundamental signified, such indeed is the origin of society and languages" (*Of Grammatology* 266). Asserting that the presence of a female "other" is crucial for the definition of masculine self, Derrida deconstructs phallogocentric discourse that supports hierarchical divisions between the male self and the female "other". The relation of dependence between the self and the "other" is also discussed by Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler. Beauvoir, like Derrida, notes that the self is identified through the "other" for "[n]o group ever defines itself as One without immediately setting up the Other opposite itself" (26). Therefore, she does not regard male and female sexes as two independent groups but believes that man and woman form a couple that is "a fundamental unit with the two halves riveted to each other" (29). Similarly, Butler contends that one needs the "other" to be identified: "[O]ne is one's gender to the extent that one is not the other gender, a formulation that presupposes and enforces the restriction of gender within that binary pair" (30). She assumes that man needs woman who lacks the phallus to define his identity: "For women to 'be' the Phallus means [...] to signify the Phallus through 'being' its Other, its absence, its lack, the dialectical confirmation of its identity" (59).

Beauvoir also questions also the validity of phallogocentric discourse. She maintains that human beings think in binaries and the binary relationship between the One and the Other is arbitrary for "the Other is posited as Other by the One positing itself as One" (27). Since binaries are random and invalid, the opposition between man/woman is not authentic but "superficial" (Beauvoir 24). Beauvoir thinks that in the binary system man is represented as "the positive," and woman "the negative," but this representation is inauthentic because in male-dominated world it is man who makes woman "assume herself as the Other," and "constitutes her as inessential" (25, 37). Similarly, Butler asserts that the relationship between the self and the "other" is casual: "[W]hat the person 'is,' and, indeed, what gender 'is,' is always relative to the constructed relations in which it is determined. As a shifting and contextual phenomenon, gender does not denote a substantive being, but a relative point of convergence among culturally and historically specific sets of relations" (14). Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clement are the other feminists who question phallogocentric thought. They believe that "[t]hought has always worked through opposition," and it is phallogocentric discourse that has enforced male superiority through "dual, hierarchical oppositions" (63, 64). They explain that hierarchy between the sexes is created by the patriarchal thought system in which man is associated with activity, and "woman is always associated with passivity" (64).

In "The Laugh of the Medusa," Cixous maintains that phallogocentric discourse has suppressed woman's energy and reduced her to a passive creature (356). She criticizes the fact that woman is forced to be inactive being "kept in the dark about herself, led into self-disdain by the great arm of parental-conjugal phallogocentrism" (348). Cixous believes that phallogocentric discourse sets "the opposition activity/passivity" to justify man's right "to invade, [and] to

colonize” woman, the inferior, passive being that is viewed as “a ‘dark continent’ to penetrate and to ‘pacify’” (362). Luce Irigaray, like Cixous, attacks phallogocentric view which degrades woman as the “other” that feels “resentment at lacking a sex organ” (51). Irigaray claims that patriarchal society forces women to give “a special status to the penis as the instrument of her sexual pleasure,” but she challenges the phallogocentric view by arguing that man’s desire to view himself superior to woman is an attempt to hide his “castration anxiety” (51). Furthermore, she thinks that men who have “only *one* sex organ” are envious of women who have many sex organs, including vagina, vulva, and uterus (52).

Deconstructive and feminist inquiries are concerned not only with the hierarchy between the self and the “other” but also the ambiguous relationship between the two. According to Derrida, the ambiguity between the self and the “other” is originated by the fact that although the self is viewed as the powerful, the “other” is feared for its difference: “[T]he other is first encountered at a distance, separation and fear must be overcome so that he may be approached as a fellow-being. From a distance, he is immense, like a master and a threatening force” (*Of Grammatology* 278). On the other hand, Butler explains the ambiguity between the self and the “other” through referring to Freud’s theory about mourning and melancholia.<sup>1</sup> She argues that the self tries to overcome the loss of the “other” that is loved and desired by identifying itself with the “other,” thus the loss of the “other” creates “an ambivalent relationship” between the self and the “other” “in which the role of the other is now occupied and directed by the ego itself” (78). Kristeva, like Butler, explores the obscure relationship between the self and the “other” from a psychological perspective. She maintains that the self regards the “other” as “a burden both repellent and repelled, a deep well of memory that is unapproachable and intimate” (6). Therefore, the self refuses to accept the “other” as “its kin,” which causes disintegration of the ego (5, 7). Kristeva claims that the self which is considered “[t]he clean and the proper” struggles to be separated from the abject, which evokes “aversion,” and “repugnance” to reclaim its integrity (8). Cixous, on the other hand, explains the problematic and complicated relationship between the self and the “other” in terms of gender. She claims that man has an ambiguous relationship with woman, the “other” sex, because “man, confusing himself with his penis and rushing in for the attack, might feel resentment and fear of being ‘taken’ by the woman, of being lost in her, absorbed, or alone” (362).

In the light of deconstructive feminist theories, Barnes’s *Flaubert’s Parrot* can be read as a text that reveals the dichotomy between the male self and the female “other”. The novel basically revolves around the story of Geoffrey

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<sup>1</sup> Freud makes a distinction between mourning and melancholia. He defines mourning as a process in which the mourner accepts the loss of the loved object, and he/she decides “that all libido shall be withdrawn from its attachments to that object” (20). Freud claims that mourning turns into melancholia when the mourner cannot overcome the loss. In this case, the free libido cannot be attached to another object, but it is “withdrawn into ego,” thus the ego is identified with the lost object (21, 25).

Braithwaite, a widowed English doctor who is obsessed with Flaubert and the parrot he borrowed from a museum for an inspiration for his novella *A Simple Heart*. However, a deconstructive feminist reading helps the reader to notice the male narrator's frustrated attempts to define his self through his dead wife Ellen, who appears as the female "other," to assert his identity as a male subject associated with fulfilment, order, unity, logos, and presence. The narrator defines himself basically as "60+ widowed doctor, children grown up, active, cheerful if inclined to melancholy, kindly, non-smoker, amateur Flaubert scholar, likes reading, food, travel to familiar places, old films, has friends" (Barnes 95), but he feels incomplete since he suffers from the absence of his wife whose presence would foster the integrity of his male self: "Sometimes, weary of loving her [Ellen] dead, [I] imagine her back to life again, for conversation, for approval" (Barnes 161). The relationship between Geoffrey and Ellen signifies the ambiguous relationship between the male ego and the female "other". The male narrator wants to be released from his dead wife whom he accuses of adultery. Therefore, he emphasizes her negative qualities to create a distinction between himself and his wife Ellen. He claims that unlike himself, Ellen was not pious and refused to remain "impassive" against destiny and blames her for "selfishness" (Barnes 166). He also explains that his wife was frivolous and indulged in trivial affairs to avoid the idea of death and after life: "[I]f you understand that gazing down into the black pit [grave] engenders calm, then you don't jump into it. Perhaps this was Ellen's weakness: an inability to gaze into the black pit. [...] One glance would make her despair, and despair would make her seek distraction" (Barnes 181). Geoffrey emphasizes Ellen's weakness by mentioning the fact that she committed suicide. Since he regards Ellen as a weak, fragile person, he believes her suicide was "impulsive" rather than deliberate or organized (Barnes 168). As such, the narrator declares his superiority against his wife who "was not sensible" (Barnes 102). He distinguishes himself from Ellen, whom he blames for their unhappiness, and associates his self with wisdom and the female "other" with imprudence: "In life, we make a decision—or a decision makes us—and we go one way; had we made a different decision (as I once told my wife; though I don't think she was in a condition to appreciate my wisdom), we would have been elsewhere" (Barnes 89). Regarding his wife as the opposite of his "positive" ego, he tries to detach himself from the female "other" that is associated with negativity.

Geoffrey aims to create a distinction between himself and Ellen by attributing negative qualities to his deceased wife, but, paradoxically, he negates the negativity of the female "other" by depicting her in a positive light. The narrator admits that he still feels love and respect for Ellen, his "much-loved only wife," although she deceived him (Barnes 162). He claims that Ellen was indulged in adultery, but still "[s]he wasn't corrupted" and "her spirit didn't coarsen" since "she never ran up bills" and "she was honourable: she only ever lied to [him] about her secret life" (Barnes 164). He also praises Ellen for not "display[ing] the cowardly docility which Flaubert describes as characteristic

of the adulterous woman” or considering adultery “a most conventional way to rise above the conventional” (Barnes 164). Since Geoffrey remembers Ellen, his lost alter ego, as “a good wife,” and “miss[es] her,” his attempts to separate himself from the female “other” prove futile (Barnes 163). This fact, in turn, exemplifies the ambivalent relationship between the self and the “other”. Geoffrey needs to be detached from Ellen, the female “other,” to restore the integrity of his self which has been damaged due to her infidelity. However, since he still loves and misses Ellen and needs her to define his self, he is unable to achieve a complete detachment from the female “other”. The narrator’s ambiguous relationship with Ellen, in turn, deconstructs the hegemony of male self. Struggling to overcome the loss of the female “other,” the narrator identifies himself with his wife, whom he associates with weakness. He takes the role of the “other” by claiming himself responsible for Ellen’s weakness and infidelity: “She wasn’t a defier, a conscious free spirit; she was a rusher, a lunger, a bolter, a bunker. Perhaps I made her worse; perhaps those who forgive and dote are more irritating than they ever suspect” (Barnes 164). Moreover, Geoffrey admits that he, like Ellen, was “disloyal” as he pretended to be ignorant about Ellen’s extramarital affairs to deny the fact that “[he’s] no longer loved” (Barnes 165). His inability to face reality and his attempts to exonerate Ellen from all charges of adultery prove his weakness. As such, the male self is merged with the female other that is stigmatized as a weak creature. The ambiguity between the two, in turn, deconstructs the phallogocentric discourse that creates and maintains a hierarchy between self and “other”.

Derrida argues that logocentric discourse creates presence-non-presence and speech-writing dichotomies which are based on a hierarchy. He claims that logocentric discourse values presence against absence, or “non-self-presence” since “the meaning of being” and “[t]he formal essence of the signified” are associated with presence (*Of Grammatology* 17, 70, 18). As speech enables a face-to-face relation, it is associated with “reality,” and “presence” (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 33). Writing, on the other hand, is related to non-presence since it is considered to be an “image” and a “representation” of language, or speech rather than reality, or presence, thus it is viewed as inferior to speech, associated with absence (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 33). According to Derrida, logocentric thinkers, like Rousseau, also argue that since speech directly signifies thoughts, it is superior to writing that is just “an image or representation” (*Of Grammatology* 144). Hence, they conclude that writing is connected with “emptiness” for it is a substitute for conveying thoughts (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 145). As writing is related to non-presence by logocentric discourse, Geoffrey Braithwaite’s strategy to emphasize his presence through writing is futile. The male narrator tries to deal with the ambiguity between his self and the female “other” through writing to negate the presence of his wife. While Geoffrey tries to confirm his self and emphasize the absence of his wife through writing, he finds himself in a logocentric position. He aims to assume his presence and regain his self-respect and self-confidence by being a writer but feels inhibited by the (non)presence of his

wife: "Three stories contend within me. One about Flaubert, one about Ellen, one about myself. My own is the simplest of the three—it hardly amounts to more than a convincing proof of my existence—and yet I find it the hardest to begin. My wife's is more complicated" (Barnes 85-86). As the narrator does not have thorough knowledge about his wife, who appears as an absent, ambiguous, and uncanny figure, he feels impotent and constrained while telling her story: "I am telling you a pure story. She was born in 1920, married in 1940, gave birth in 1942 and 1946, died in 1975. I'll start again. Small people are meant to be neat, aren't they; but Ellen wasn't. She was just over five feet tall, yet moved awkwardly ... I'll start again" (Barnes 162). His inability to finish his narrative about the female "other" disturbs his plan to restore the significance of his self through becoming a writer like Flaubert.

Suffering from his damaged male ego in real life, Geoffrey wants to control his wife Ellen on a fictional level; therefore, he tries to dominate the whole narrative by rewriting Ellen's and his own story. His attempt to create his version of Ellen's life is related to his desire to control the narrative. Although he claims to reveal the truth, his endeavour to shape the truth about his wife is obvious: "I have to hypothesise a little. I have to fictionalise (though that's not what I meant when I called this a pure story). We never talked about her secret life. So I have to invent my way to the truth" (Barnes 165). Being aware of the fictionality of his fiction, he believes that writing does not present external reality because "words give birth to things as much as things give birth to words" (Barnes 88). Geoffrey argues that language creates its own truth, and he does not agree that "language and reality 'match up' so congruently" (Barnes 88). In this way, he implies that his writing cannot verify Ellen's non-existence, or confirm his authority in reality for it is a mere representative of his wife's life and cannot disclose the "pure" truth about her. He also understands that although he can assert power over his wife on a fictional level through distorting the reality in his writing, he is helpless and powerless in the real world since he cannot "make any difference" about it (Barnes 169). That is the reason why he prefers to tell the fictional story of Flaubert, which gives him a false sense of mastery and integrity, instead of Ellen's "true story," which makes him feel disintegrated (Barnes 86). Accordingly, although the narrator tries to prove his presence through writing to assert superiority over his absent wife, he ironically emphasizes his insecurity about his own presence and significance.

Cixous asserts that men refuse to represent women as active, energetic beings, so they do not write "about their sexuality, that is, its infinite and mobile complexity, about their eroticization, sudden turn-ons of a certain miniscule-immense area of their bodies" (355). Trying to secure his position as a powerful patriarchal figure, Geoffrey disregards the existence of his wife, who reminds him of his insufficiency and weakness, by suppressing her body and sexual drives in his writing. Hence, he avoids talking about Ellen's physicality and sexuality in detail; instead he just gives a basic description of her bodily

features: “She was just over five feet; she had a broad, smooth face, with an easy pink in her cheeks; she never blushed; her eyes—as I have told you—were greeny-blue” (Barnes 164). He also refrains from dwelling on his wife’s physical and sexual experiences because he wants to be detached from her body that was “made lustrous by adultery” (Barnes 164). The idea of his wife’s impurity makes Geoffrey anxious about his manliness. Therefore, he continuously questions whether his wife was faithful, or gets uneasy by the thoughts of men who “told [obscene] jokes about her,” and envies the pharmacist who examined her bruised foot “with the tenderness of a foot-fetishist” (Barnes 163, 84). In this way, the wife’s body appears as a site of sexual energy, which makes her the “other” that challenges the conventional image of woman as a passive, castrated and frigid figure. Feeling a threat on the integrity of his male self, the narrator stigmatizes the defiled female body as “the Body of Sin,” and assumes moral superiority over Ellen (Barnes 85). He also annihilates his wife’s physical presence through refusing to accept her as a physical being that has a real presence. Therefore, the wife appears in the novel like a spectre whose presence is justified only through her occasional appearances as a part of the narrator’s memories. Geoffrey tries to prevent his wife’s metaphorical resurrection through digressions which enable him to forget her presence momentarily: “Nowadays, when I remember Ellen, I try to think of a hailstorm that berated Rouen in 1853” (Barnes 161). Dismissing Ellen’s memory by moving to another subject, the narrator tries to escape from the annoying presence of the “other” that reminds him of his dismantled male self: “I never thought my wife was perfect. I loved her, but I never deceived myself. I remember ... But I’ll keep that for another time. I’ll remember instead another lecture I once attended” (Barnes 76). Since his wife’s disloyalty makes him feel insignificant and degraded, he prefers to repress his memories through creating diversions. In this way, he negates the presence of the female “other” whose body is buried metaphorically under his digressive narrative.

Braithwaite erases the presence of his wife not only on a narrative level but also in reality. He literally terminates the corporeal presence of Ellen in an attempt to confirm his virility and to destroy the body of the female subject which embodies the power of feminine sexuality. His desire to see the female “other” as a non-present being can be explained through phallogocentric discourse. Phallogocentrism assumes that a woman does not exist as a corporeal entity for she is “castrated,” and lacks “a full, present, apparent phallus,” thus she is viewed as the “other” who “has nothing to be seen, and who therefore represents absence needing to be recuperated” (Feder and Zakin 47). Therefore, a woman is hardly visible in patriarchal society that expects females to be passive and submissive: “It is hard to know any longer if women still exist, if they will always exist, if there should be women at all, what place they hold in this world, what place they should hold” (Beauvoir 23). Cixous and Clement, on the other hand, contend that “[d]eath is always at work” in binary relations as each couple aims to destroy one another to gain power or authority (64). If a woman challenges phallogocentric discourse which ascribes passivity and inferiority to the female sex, and refuses to “enter



into the oppositions," and "does not make a couple with the father," she is simply dismissed as a non-being, therefore "[e]ither woman is passive or she does not exist" (64). Cixous also underlines men's desire to deny the existence of women who challenge male authority and asserts that "horrifying myths" of patriarchy function as means to ostracize such powerful female figures as Medusa through associating them with "dark" and "death" (354). She further argues that "the ebullient, infinite woman" who rejects to be destroyed as a passive, weak figure in patriarchal society is reproached for "her shameful sickness," which is "that she resists death, that she makes trouble" (348). Cixous concludes that since men want ultimate power over women, they need to relate femininity to death, thus disregarding women's existence by viewing death and females as "two unrepresentable things" (355).

In accordance with the phallogocentric discourse that associates woman with death and non-presence, Geoffrey Braithwaite reveals his repressed urge to terminate his wife's presence. He makes his yearning explicit through referring to Alexandre Dumas, who argues that disloyal women should be punished with death: "Should a husband punish her [adulterous woman], or forgive her? Alexandre Dumas *fiils*, in *L'Homme-Femme*, offered uncomplicated advice: 'Kill her!'" (Barnes 163). Since Geoffrey wants to regain his male power, he struggles to pacify his adulterous wife associated with sexuality. Hence, he "need[s] a corpse as proof of [his] virility" to restore his self-esteem and vigour (Barnes 140). The depiction of the wife, who has committed suicide, in her death bed is a manoeuvre developed by the narrator to disempower the female "other": "Ellen lay with a tube in her throat and a tube in her padded forearm. The ventilator in its white oblong box provided regular spurts of life, and the monitor confirmed them ... Her condition was stable, but hopeless" (Barnes 168). As a healthy man, Geoffrey depicts Ellen from a superior position, and his superiority is two-folded: he has a presence as a living being, and he is a doctor while Ellen is a patient who is about to lose her corporeal presence and female sexuality. In both cases, he reduces Ellen to an inferior position to affirm his self.

Geoffrey's final scheme to put an end to Ellen's life, on the other hand, is a direct attack against female presence. He says that he decided to switch his wife off when her situation became hopeless: "I looked down at Ellen. ... I switched her off. They asked if I wanted them to do it; but I think she would have preferred me to" (Barnes 168). Although he tries to justify his decision, he cannot manage to hide his sense of guilt: "No, I didn't kill my wife. I might have known you'd think that. First you find out that she's dead; then, a while later, I say that I never killed a single patient. Aha, who did you kill, then?" (Barnes 97). Geoffrey denies that he deliberately killed his wife, but his act unveils his wish to get rid of the presence of a female figure associated with vitality and sexual power. He himself admits that he ravaged his wife's presence by his own decision: "So you could say ... that I killed her. You could just. I switched her off. I stopped her living. Yes" (Barnes 168). In this way, the narrator tries to

annihilate female sexuality and deny the sexual female body through exposing his wife to harassment and persecution. However, his wife's death does not offer a resolution to restore his damaged ego since he is still unable to confirm his self. As he cannot solve the ambiguous relationship between his self and the female "other," the destruction of Ellen "was an answer and not an answer; it was an ending and not an ending" (Barnes 189).

Geoffrey Braithwaite encloses his obscure conjunction with Ellen and his frustration and anxiety over the absence of the female "other" within his narrative about Flaubert and his parrot. Since the death of his wife, who is construed as the "other," damages the coherence of his self, and leaves him just as an old, bereaved husband, Geoffrey searches for a means to restore his identity. Believing that "[he] can't define [himself] directly, just by looking face-on into the mirror," the narrator seeks to hold on to something/somebody that will give him "a false sense of [his] own worth" (Barnes 95, 165). He tries to compensate for the absence of the female "other" through inventing a purpose for himself: "[I]f one dies before the other, the survivor has a corpse to lug around. Pride makes us long for a solution to things—a solution, a purpose, a final cause" (Barnes 169). Hence, he decides to author the life of Flaubert, a prominent male writer, to posit himself as a subject that tries to gain his self-importance and to "make sense of life" on the fictional level (Barnes 168). Geoffrey, as a writer, claims kinship to the dead author, who is distinguished with his "courtly manner, intelligence and fame" so that he can transcend his ordinary self and impair his male ego by ascribing himself an active and eminent role (Barnes 24). Denominating himself as the writer of the life of Flaubert, Geoffrey tries to recover his damaged virility and feel himself able, potent, and integrated enough to discuss such complicated, intellectual issues as "the assumed divinity of the nineteenth-century novelist" (Barnes 89). However, his ambition for authorship is accompanied by hesitation about his artistic potency. He excuses his own hesitation by claiming that his ambition to be a writer like Flaubert has been hampered by marriage life: "I thought of writing books myself once. I had the ideas; I even made notes. But I was a doctor, married with children" (Barnes 13). Believing that he has the intellectual power and capacity to be a writer, the narrator attempts to transcend his passive identity as a conventional married man having a dull life with children and wife.

Although Geoffrey emphasizes his tendency to become a writer, his fear of being unable to finish his book is explicit: "Is it better not to have the dreams, the work, and then the desolation of uncompleted work? Perhaps, like Frédéric and Deslauriers, we should prefer the consolation of non-fulfilment" (Barnes 22). Geoffrey's dread about leaving his work incomplete reveals his insecurity about his literary and linguistic competence. Therefore, he cannot overcome the absence of the female "other" through associating himself with Flaubert, who has both "literary success" and "social success," and reflects his insecurity on the dead author (Barnes 25). According to him although Flaubert was good with words, he felt impotent to convey meaning through language: "Words came easily to Flaubert; but he also saw the underlying inadequacy of the

Word" (Barnes 19). He justifies his claim by referring to Sartreans, who relate Flaubert to Loulou, his parrot, and believe Flaubert was unable to move beyond the imitation and repetition of already existing words: "Loulou's inability to do more than repeat at second hand the phrases he hears is an indirect confession of the novelist's own failure. The parrot/writer feebly accepts language as something received, imitative and inert" (Barnes 19). Ironically enough, the narrator negates his power as a writer through reducing Flaubert into a mere imitator of words. Therefore, he fails to regain the coherence of his ego by defining himself through another male subject.

While associating himself with Flaubert, Geoffrey unconsciously associates his dead wife Ellen with Loulou, Flaubert's stuffed parrot, which represents death and absence. The analogy between the parrot and the dead wife gets explicit when Geoffrey visits the Museum of Natural History, where Flaubert is said to choose Loulou out of fifty parrots. Parrots which are kept in a dark, small room signify the ambiguous position of the female "other": "It was a small room ... Despite a few ceiling lights, it remained quite dark, this burial vault on the top floor. Though it wasn't, I suppose, altogether a tomb ... So it was an ambivalent room, half-morgue and half-purgatory" (Barnes 189-190). The animals are on the boundary between life and death like Ellen, who is dead but alive in the narrator's mind. The parrots are dead in that they are "covered in a sprinkling of white pesticide," and their "colouring had been dimmed by the dusting of pesticide which lay over them," but they give the impression that they "would be taken out again into the daylight" (Barnes 190, 189). This queer encounter, similar to his encounter with Ellen's memories, makes him feel uneasy: "They gazed at me like three quizzical, sharp-eyed, dandruff-ridden, dishonourable old men. They did look—I had to admit it—a little cranky" (Barnes 190). Geoffrey's uneasiness and confusion on seeing the parrots and his inability to find the authentic bird enact his failure to come to terms with Ellen's death and to compensate for the absence of the female "other" that he needs to assert his self.

It is also interesting that Geoffrey's ambiguous feelings towards Ellen, considered a pleasant wife but a selfish, impractical woman, appear to have been directed towards Loulou. In one instance, Geoffrey expresses his amazement and happiness on seeing the parrot at the Hôtel-Dieu, where Flaubert spent his early years. He feels "moved and cheered" as the parrot belongs to Flaubert, about whom he wants to write (Barnes 16). Furthermore, the narrator admires Loulou as "the articulate beast, a rare creature that makes human sounds," and says that it represents "the Holy Ghost, the giver of tongues" (Barnes 18). He also feels "affection, even reverence" for the animal (Barnes 19). However, Geoffrey does not want Loulou to be superior to Flaubert, who represents the male ego. Therefore, he undermines its ability to imitate human sounds through arguing that the parrot "represent[s] clever vocalisation without much brain power" (Barnes 18). Pointing to the mechanical intelligence of the parrot, the narrator degrades it as "a fluttering,

elusive emblem of the writer's voice" (Barnes 182-183). As such, he attenuates Loulou's intellectual capacity to substantiate the superiority of the writer, standing for the male self, against the parrot, associated with the female "other". On the other hand, the parrot he encounters at the Flaubert museum in Croisset is distinguished from the parrot at the Hôtel-Dieu in that "its expression was less irritating" and it "looked the calmer company" (Barnes 21). These conflicting images of the parrots confuse Geoffrey's mind in much the same manner as the contradictory portraits of his dead wife leave him in perplexity: "[T]he duplicate parrots continued to flutter in my mind: one of them amiable and straightforward, the other cocky and interrogatory. I wrote letters to various academics who might know if either of the parrots had been properly authenticated" (Barnes 22). In this case, though the narrator bears complicated feelings for Loulou, he does not give up his search for it, which replicates his unceasing enterprises to find the female "other" that can substantiate his virility.

In *Flaubert's Parrot* the ambiguous relationship between Geoffrey Braithwaite and his wife Ellen negates the validity of phallogocentric discourse that creates a hierarchical relationship between male and female sexes based on the supremacy of the former. Although Geoffrey assumes the role of a writer to feel important and self-contained, he cannot prove his superiority to Ellen, whose infidelity has impaired his manliness. The male narrator tries to detach himself from his dead wife by repressing her memories in his story about Flaubert and his parrot, but he is unable to achieve a complete detachment since he wants to be united with his negative self, namely his wife, to have an integrated self. Accordingly, the narrator prefers to remember Ellen as a fragile, insensible, and non-present figure to assert his identity as a vigorous, dominant, sensible, and animate being. However, Ellen's sexual power makes him feel impotent and castrated; therefore, he renounces her sexuality and femininity through emphasizing her absence. Consequently, the female "other" appears both as a negative figure that is related to lust, sexual power, and heresy, and a pacified, devitalized female figure that emerges in a spectral form that has hardly any presence or power. Hence, Geoffrey's search for the truth about Flaubert and his parrot is in fact a search for his lost other self that he needs to define his masculinity.

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